

Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, Jr. Remarks
(As delivered)
Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (FOCAP) Forum
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FOCAP President McIndoe, esteemed FOCAP members, and honored guests – I am delighted to join you all today for this forum.

We gather on the heels of President Aquino's U.S. trip, a trip that helped make U.S.-Philippine relations stronger than ever, with the signing of the Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, the U.S.-ASEAN Leaders meeting, and the face-to-face meeting between President Obama and President Aquino. While I am eager to hear your questions, I would like to discuss some areas of cooperation that were brought up in the course of President Aquino's visit to the U.S.

Before I begin, I wish to extend my appreciation to the men and women of the Philippine media for your professionalism and perseverance. Every attack against journalists should be investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted in accordance with the law. The pursuit of truth is at times dangerous. You stand as guardians of free speech, champions of democracy, and proponents of transparency. For journalists like you, and for diplomats like me, this has been an exciting, amazing time in the Philippines.

The U.S. is committed to working with the Aquino administration to further strengthen our close economic and security relationship, and to further deepen the partnership that allows our two countries to build a safer, more prosperous world for our citizens.

Both President Obama and President Aquino spoke to the United Nations General Assembly about the importance of poverty reduction and the fulfillment of all of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In support of this aspiration, we have negotiated with the Philippines a \$434 million dollar grant, or compact, through the Millennium Challenge Corporation to fund three projects, developed by local experts. The compact will fund the construction of a major roadway on Samar Island. It will bolster efficiency and transparency at the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Finally, it will expand the Kalihi-CIDSS project for building small-scale community infrastructure. Over the five years of the program the MCC grant will help reduce poverty, stimulate growth and combat corruption, goals set by President Aquino that we are proud to support.

The MCC compact is only the most recent part of the U.S. commitment to further socio-economic development in the Philippines. The U.S. is the largest development grant donor to the Philippines. In fact since 1946, the American people have contributed more than \$7 billion in economic assistance to the Philippines.

Development assistance can help provide needed infrastructure that attracts investment. New jobs, however, come from the private sector. Let me congratulate President Aquino on his clear signal that the Philippines is open for business. American firms immediately responded, promising \$2.4 billion dollars in new investments to the President. Businesses don't commit

where they don't have confidence, so you should take this news as confirmation that U.S. firms are bullish on the Philippines.

Increasing bilateral and regional trade likewise spurs economic growth and creates jobs for all. We welcome President Aquino's announcement that his administration intends to encourage and expand trade with the United States and pursue participation in the regional Asia-Pacific trade agreement known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Finally, President Aquino underscored his commitment to ending corruption and promoting good stewardship of development assistance. These welcome announcements are already generating increased confidence in the dynamic economy of the Philippines.

The road ahead is promising, but we must not ignore impediments to progress. For instance, the problem of human trafficking traps vulnerable individuals whose desire to earn a better living is exploited in a modern form of slavery. One of my top priorities as Ambassador is helping end this heinous illegal activity which is a global threat requiring a worldwide response. The Philippines is undertaking significant efforts in the fight against human trafficking. I am confident government authorities will continue their efforts to prosecute and convict more of those criminals who exploit the weak and vulnerable, especially women and children.

Combating this problem requires a concerted effort by law enforcement, the judiciary, other government institutions, and civil society. I thank all of you in the news media for continuing to inform your readers, viewers, and listeners of the seriousness of the human trafficking problem and how it destroys innocent lives.

The U.S. values the Philippines as a partner in the effort against international terrorism. The Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police have taken an increasingly effective posture against terrorists, and we have been privileged to support their efforts at the invitation of the government.

Let me say, for the record, that the temporarily deployed U.S. military forces do not, repeat not, engage in combat. They offer information and support to the very brave AFP soldiers who are on the front lines combating terrorism.

Our security cooperation is vital in the counter-terrorism effort, but also in the effort to provide better lives to our citizens. The Philippines has been a gracious host to joint training exercises that allow both our militaries to practice skills that make us more effective partners, whether working on a UN peacekeeping mission or responding to a natural disaster in Manila, in New Orleans, or in Haiti. The Visiting Forces Agreement makes this cooperation possible in an atmosphere of absolute respect for Philippine sovereignty. This is the kind of partnership that saves lives. Just last week, we marked the first anniversary of Tropical Storm Ondoy. The heroic cooperation between our two militaries saved lives and offered much-appreciated humanitarian relief to tens of thousands of people affected by last year's storms.

Finally, let me highlight our increasing cooperation with Philippine law enforcement authorities. Through training, contributions of equipment, and cooperation on investigations we are working more closely than ever to assure the law is respected and criminals are apprehended.

Cooperation between the U.S. and the Philippines takes place within a multilateral framework as well. We salute the Philippines' leadership in supporting the US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting as the Country Coordinator for US-ASEAN dialogue. At that meeting President Obama stated the U.S. will continue to support ASEAN's goal of creating a more effective and integrated community by 2015.

I believe our cooperation with the Philippines can bring increased security for both our nations. I believe that by working together we can confront modern day slave-traders who treat humans like commodities. I believe that the U.S. can contribute to President Aquino's goals of creating jobs and opportunities here in the Philippines, which will help us achieve our shared goals of sustainable prosperity for the global community.

I look forward to working with the Filipino people and the Aquino administration to pursue our common visions and work toward a brighter future. And I look forward to working with all of you – friends in the media who help us inform Filipinos and international audiences about all these partnerships; fellow members of the diplomatic corps who are pursuing common goals in partnership with the Philippines; and friends in the business community whose companies employ millions and contribute to the expansion of the economy.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to join you here this morning. Thank you for the work you do to support and defend the right of the people to be informed. *Maraming salamat sa inyong lahat.*